

The Babysitting Series by Idrab

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Summary: Just a bunch of basically stand-alone (Harrington) one-shots that I can slot into the "babysitting" theme.

1. A Bunch Of Nerds

"I can't believe we're spending the *only* time we have together this week babysitting a bunch of nerds."

Steve rolled his eyes at Billy, who was draped over the sofa, looking miserable.

"What are you talking about? We've been hanging out every day!"

"Yeah", Billy said and pursed his lips, "but there are always other people around. We haven't been *alone* for a *week*."

"Stop pouting, it doesn't become you."

"Everything becomes me", Billy said and stretched, licking his lips and blinking exaggeratedly with his long eyelashes. Steve had to admit – if only to himself – that he painted a pretty picture. He didn't say that, though; Billy's ego was big enough already.

"The kids had to be *somewhere*, and mrs Henderson had to take her cat to the vet."

The kids had planned to spend the evening at Dustin's – the other parents having no doubt taken the opportunity to make plans for the night – but when mrs Henderson's cat started coughing up something that *definitely wasn't hairballs*, *Steve*, she'd called Steve in a panic to ask him to *please* look after the kids for a while, and he couldn't say no.

"I *couldn't* say no, Billy. It's mrs Henderson!"

Billy huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Don't give me that. You *like* mrs Henderson. You wouldn't have been able to say no either."

"For you, I *would*", Billy grumbled, but straightened up. "But now, because you're too *nice*, instead of all the *other* things I'd planned for tonight, we're stuck babysitting the nerd herd."

"I'm not too nice. And– Wait, what other things?"

Billy looked off into the distance like the over-dramatic jerk he was and said, airily, "Guess we won't ever find out, now."

Steve threw a pillow at him and smirked when Billy emerged from under it, looking properly outraged. "Hey, watch the hair!"

"What, that rat's nest on your head?"

Billy's face turned instantly serious. "You take that back."

"Never", Steve said, fighting back a grin.

"At least I don't use *girl* products in my hair!"

Steve made a point to give Billy's hair a disdainful look. "And it shows, too."

"Oh you're dead, Harrington."

That was the only warning Steve got before Billy jumped up over the back of the sofa, wielding the pillow like a weapon. Steve had to use all the skills he'd honed in basketball practice to dodge it, but he still ended up with his back to the wall and Billy pressed up against him with his hands on either side of Steve's face.

"What did you say about my hair?" Billy's voice was low and husky, and it *did things* to Steve who couldn't help but squirm a little. "Hmm, Harrington ...?"

Fuck it. Steve couldn't be expected to control himself when Billy's lips were just inches from his own - he leaned forward for a kiss. Billy made a little surprised noise before he got with the program and pushed back. The back of Steve's head hit the wall again, but he honestly didn't mind at that particular moment because he was burying his fingers in Billy's blonde locks and pulling his head. Billy let out a breath, and Steve captured it between his own lips –

– and that's when a crash from the kitchen made the both of them jump. They looked at each other, then to the doorway, and then back to each other. Billy was the first to break – he let out a raspy laugh

and took a couple of steps back, running his tongue over his bottom lip and dragging a hand through his hair.

"Shit", he said. "Right. The brat pack."

"You know what?" Steve said and reached out for Billy again while making grabbing motions with his hands. "I don't even care if they find out about us. Come here."

Billy smirked – a smile that made shivers run down Steve's spine – and shrugged. "Fuck it. Let's traumatize them properly."

They met halfway but had barely touched when there was another crash from the kitchen. Steve threw up his arms in frustration. "I'm gonna kill them!"

Billy bit his lip and raised an eyebrow. "I love it when you talk dirty."

"Shut up."

"Mmm, bossy ...!"

They could hear shrill voices arguing from the other end of the house, and Steve shook his head to clear it. He closed his eyes, took a couple of deep breaths and thought about dead puppies, nuclear bombs and that time he accidentally walked in on their coach naked in the shower – anything he could think of to will his heartbeat (and other parts of himself) back to normal.

He glanced over at Billy.

"Guess we better check on them."

"*You* check on them. They're *your* kids."

"Don't think you're getting off easy. 20% of them are yours."

Billy narrowed his eyes, like he usually did when Steve said something particularly stupid. "One out of six doesn't make 20%, Steve."

"I *know* that, but Jane's at least part yours, so."

Billy straightened up. "Damn right she is. She and Max are *way* better than the others."

"Playing favorites, Hargrove?" Steve threw over his shoulder as he walked out of the living room.

"Don't worry, Harrington", came the reply, closer to Steve's ear than he'd been expecting. "You'll always be my number one."

With that, Billy slapped his ass and walked past him into the hallway and towards the kitchen, loudly calling out, "Hey, shitheads!"

The kitchen looked like a bomb had gone off. The counter was filled with a bunch of stuff that Steve was *certain* hadn't been there ten minutes ago. There was a fog of flour in the air, and a thin layer of it covered every available surface – including Dustin and Mike, who were yelling at each other. Will was crouching on the floor, gingerly picking up pieces of a broken mug, and Max was standing by the counter, stirring something in a bowl while Jane watched her. The only one who looked up when Steve and Billy entered the room was Lucas – and he threw his hands up, eyes wide, and exclaimed, "For the record, I was *against* this!"

Ignoring Lucas in favor of taking in the general chaos of the room, Steve shrieked, "What are you doing to my mother's kitchen?"

That made everyone look up, and unfortunately for Steve's sanity, most of them started speaking at the same time.

"We're making cookies!"

"Cookies."

"But then Mike dropped the mug."

"I only dropped it because you threw flour at me!"

"*You started it!*"

"I dropped the bag, it was an accident!"

"An accident, Mike? You dropped it *on my head!*"

"I had nothing to do with this."

"Why don't you make yourselves useful and find us some chocolate chips?"

"Who made *you* boss?"

"I'm the only one actually *doing* anything!"

Steve was going to have an aneurysm. He dragged his hand over his face and then screamed, "Why are you making cookies?! Your mom left us cookies, Dustin. We *have* cookies!"

Dustin nodded and pointed at Steve with both hands. "Excellent point, but not exactly true. We *had* cookies."

Steve blinked. "You *ate* them all already?" And then, after a beat, "Without saving *any* for me and Billy?"

"That's why we're making new ones!" Dustin exclaimed and clapped his hands together.

"You're making them using *my* stuff."

"But they're made with love?"

Steve opened his mouth to reply, but before he got a word out Will held out the shards of the broken mug and said, "I can buy a new mug for you, Steve."

Steve heard a snort behind him and turned towards Billy, who was leaning casually against the wall.

"Do you think this is funny, Hargrove?"

"Oh no, not at all", Billy said with a shit-eating grin, eyes twinkling with mirth, "I think this is *hilarious*."

Steve didn't know if he wanted to kiss him or punch him. Possibly both. He gave the blonde a look that he hoped expressed this, before addressing the room at large.

"Okay, listen up you little shits. Here's what you'll do. You don't have to buy me a new mug, Will." He turned to Mike. "You do, though." Cue loud protests from Mike, which Steve ignored in favor of turning to Max and Jane. "You guys, continue making cookies. No use wasting ingredients."

"Yeah", Billy chimed in, "plus we want cookies, too."

"The rest of you guys, you're gonna clean this mess up."

"What?! But I *told* them we shouldn't do it, I shouldn't have to clean!"

"Can it, Sinclair", Billy said before Steve had a chance to comment. "Ever heard of 'guilty by association'?"

Lucas looked like he *really* wanted to protest, but a glare from Max shut him up. Quite impressive, actually. Steve wished he could get *his* boyfriend to shut up with just a look. Of course, he had other ways to shut Billy up – none that were appropriate in the presence of other people, though.

"What are *you* gonna do, then?" Dustin said, thankfully pulling Steve from those kind of thoughts.

Steve leveled him with a *look*. "Me and Billy – who had nothing whatsoever to do with creating this mess – are going to make sure that you clean it up. And then we're going to eat cookies while you guys go back to whatever lame game you were *supposed* to play *in the den*. And when your parents pick you up, we'll spend the night complaining about you guys and eat even *more* cookies."

"Steeeeeve!" Dustin complained.

"No. Nope. Get to it, guys. I want this kitchen *spotless!* Cleaning materials are under the sink and behind that door over there. Go."

Will went willingly, dragging along a muttering Mike. Lucas threw up his hands in the air like the whole situation was more than unfair, and Dustin dragged his feet and glanced over his shoulder at Steve, looking like a sad dog. Steve wasn't affected by it. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Billy.

"So bossy", Billy commented, low enough that Steve was the only one to hear him.

"Damn right."

"I dig it."

He could see Billy's smile out of the corner of his eye, and had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. It wouldn't do to look anything less than stern when he had a bunch of kids to supervise.

Billy made it difficult, though. "Watching you boss the nerds around like this – and then cookies after? Tonight's shaping up to be better than I thought."

"I'm glad."

"You sure know how to show a guy good time."

"Mhm."

"This is *almost* as good as the plans I had."

And dammit, but Steve couldn't help himself. He glanced over, looked Billy in the eyes and prompted, "Which were ...?"

Billy grinned and broke eye contact. Looked straight ahead, as if he was simply observing the cleanup. Licked his lips – and damn him and that tongue of his; Steve couldn't look away.

"You know, Steve. I might just tell you, after all."

He pushed off the wall. As he passed Steve, he whispered, "Or *show* you, when we're *alone*."

Steve was left standing by the doorway, fighting down a blush as his mind suggested possible future activities. Meanwhile Billy stalked over to the counter to pour more chocolate chips into the bowl that Max and Jane was working on, stating that "there can never be enough chocolate chips in cookies".

Steve grinned as Jane hung an apron around Billy's neck, and

couldn't help but agree with Billy's earlier statement; tonight really was shaping up.

2. Girl's Night In

Billy was walking around with a thundering expression, and had done so ever since Neil had informed him that whatever plans he had for the evening would have to be cancelled, because Neil and Susan were going out so Billy would have to drive Max to, and then home from, her friend's house. Billy's objections had been brutally shut down, and even though Max had tried to say that she could take her skateboard – because she didn't want any trouble – it was for nothing. Neil had made up his mind.

"Susan talked to the girl's father", Neil said with a voice that didn't leave room for arguments, "and they agreed that Max'll have dinner there, so you can drive her over at six, and then pick her up around nine thirty, since it's not a school night."

Billy had stalked out into the hallway where the phone was to call whatever girl he was meeting to cancel, and had looked like he was one step away from snarling at everyone for the rest of the day.

Now, Max avoided looking at Billy, afraid that he would take it out on her somehow. She hadn't been scared of Billy in a long time, but he could still be an asshole with a short temper – even though he'd been acting better, lately. Sometimes he could even be fun to be around. Almost like how he was in the beginning, when Susan and Neil started dating.

Her mom and Neil were getting ready, but were still home at a quarter to six, when it was time to go. She hugged her mom, grabbed her backpack and skateboard, and went out the front door. She hadn't seen Billy in the house for half an hour, but he was already in the front seat of the Camaro, waiting for her.

She jumped in the passenger seat and put on her seatbelt, and Billy started the car without a word. She glanced over, but he didn't look angry. She couldn't quite place the look on his face. It was ... disappointment, maybe. Whatever it was, it made her feel bad.

"I'm sorry", she said, quietly. He tensed at her voice, and she hurried to continue, "I can take my skateboard home later, you don't have to

pick me up. You can go on your date. Neil won't have to know."

He didn't take his eyes away from the road, but he sighed. "No, it's okay. I'll pick you up. I cancelled, anyway."

"Maybe you could un-cancel?"

Billy's lips actually twitched at that, but he shook his head. "No, they had something else to do, apparently. It's okay, though. Some other time."

It sounded like he was convincing himself rather than her, and she felt guilty.

"Still", she said, turning to look out the window. "I'm sorry."

And for a while, she thought that that was the end of their conversation. Until he said, in a low voice, "Not your fault."

When they got into town, she had to direct him, as he'd never driven to Jane's before. He raised a doubting eyebrow when they had to park the car and walk the rest of the way through the woods, but he didn't say anything. Just locked the car and walked after her through the trees.

"Watch the trip wire."

"The *what*?"

Max ignored him and bounded up the steps to the cabin. She knocked, and the door opened just as Billy walked up next to her, revealing a somewhat disheveled Jim Hopper. Max felt, more than saw, Billy tense up beside her. A glance revealed wide eyes and raised shoulders.

"Hi Hop!" she said when neither of them spoke.

"Hi Max. Uh. Jane's inside, I'm ... Come in."

He walked to the side, letting her in, but then his eyes narrowed as he watched Billy, who hadn't moved an inch.

"William Hargrove."

"Uh. Yes sir."

Billy looked nervous, but only to someone who knew him well. Max herself wouldn't have recognized it a couple of months ago.

"How would you like to do me a favor, William?"

Billy looked like a deer in headlights. Max almost laughed out loud.

"What kind of favor?"

"I'm going out, and the babysitter's late. Would you mind staying for a bit, keep an eye on the girls? Just until the sitter gets here. It shouldn't be too long, twenty minutes maybe."

Max watched the two of them. Billy still hadn't moved from his place on the porch, but when Hopper raised his arm to motion for him to come inside, he backed up a step. Hopper frowned a little as if it bothered him – then again, Hopper was always frowning so maybe he was just stressed.

Billy licked his lips and shrugged, a gesture way too casual to be real.
"Yeah, sure. I don't mind."

He glanced over at Max, and she imagined that if they'd been alone, he'd have quipped "It's not like I have plans anymore". As it was, though, he just squared his shoulders and managed a smile.

"Good man", Hopper said and clapped him on the shoulder. Billy tensed up and looked like he regretted his answer already, as Hopper steered him into the cabin.

"Jane!" he bellowed, making Billy flinch.

Max noticed that Hopper never let go of Billy's shoulder, but she didn't give it any more thought because Jane emerged from another room, face lighting up when she saw them both.

"Hi Jane!"

"Hello Max." She turned her gaze towards Billy. "Hello Billy."

"Hi, kid."

"Oh, I didn't realize that you two knew each other already?" Hopper managed to sound both curious and thoughtful when he turned to look at Billy, who paled.

Max took pity on him. "Billy's been hanging with Steve some when the Party's been hanging out."

"Steve?" Hopper said, eyebrows raised. "Steve Harrington?"

"Yeah. I mean yes, sir."

Hopper looked thoughtful for a moment, until he glanced at his wrist watch and swore. "Right. I have to go. Jane, there's food in the fridge. Max, make yourself at home. Billy – can I call you Billy?"

"Uh. Sure."

"If you're hungry you can help yourself to whatever before you go. Thanks for doing this. The sitter should be here soon to help them with dinner. Just make sure they don't burn the place down before he gets here."

Billy nodded and relaxed a bit when Hopper let go of his shoulder to walk across the room and pull on his jacket. A muffled "alright, bye" later, and he hurried out the door, leaving the three of them alone. Billy looked a little uncomfortable being in an unknown house, but Max had been here before so she had no qualms going into the tiny kitchen and open the refrigerator.

"What's for dinner?" she asked, poking her head inside.

Jane appeared next to her, a small smile on her face, pulling out a familiar box. "Eggos."

Max grinned at her friend. "The guys weren't kidding then. You really like them!"

Jane nodded, smiling.

"Eggos aren't dinner, kid." Billy had apparently followed them into the kitchen and now peered over their heads into the refrigerator. "At least not by themselves. What else have you got?"

Ten minutes later found them at the kitchen table, Billy having gone through all the cupboards and muttered to himself about the deplorable state of them – but somehow having managed to scrounge up every sugary treat that Hopper had, probably. The Eggos were therefore served with an unhealthy amount of chocolate sauce, sprinkles and gummy bears, of all things.

"There you go", he said as he put a plate in front of each of them.
"Dinner."

At their stares, he grinned. "What? He said to 'help ourselves', and it's the weekend. Live a little, girls."

Max and Jane looked at each other, then shrugged. This was far from ordinary food, but who were they to turn down such a treat?

There was a knock at the door, and Billy went to open it, grabbing his jacket on the way over. Max expected him to leave now, when the sitter had gotten here and he didn't have a reason to stay any longer. What she *didn't* expect was the startled laugh that came from the door.

"Steve!?"

"Billy! What are you doing here?"

"I ... Max needed a ride, and then the Chief wanted me to stay until the babysitter showed up. I ... what are *you* doing here?"

"I'm the babysitter!"

"No shit."

"Yeah, when you–"

Steve, who'd walked inside by now and closed the door behind him, glanced over to the kitchen where Max and Jane were watching the exchange. He cleared his throat.

"I had plans, but they fell through, so when Hopper called and needed a sitter, I figured ... why not, right?"

"Right."

Steve nodded to the girls and raised a hand in greeting. "Hey, guys!"

"Hello."

"Hi, Steve!"

"We made Eggos. Do you want some?"

Steve laughed. "Thanks but no thanks. I ate before I got here. You guys finish your dinner, me and Billy will be right over here."

Max turned her attention back to her plate, but it didn't escape her that Billy had hung his jacket over the back of a chair. He was smiling, and seemed to be in no hurry to leave now when Steve was there.

"Date", Jane said.

Both boys stiffened and looked over. Then Steve laughed – a little nervously, maybe – and said, "Yeah, now that you mention it, Hopper did say he was gonna meet with Joyce Byers ..." He turned to Billy. "Wanna ... watch some TV while they eat?"

Billy cleared his throat and nodded. "Yeah. Sure."

Jane looked smug. "Date", she whispered conspiratorially to Max before stuffing a huge bite of waffle and gummy bears into her mouth.

Max nodded. Hopper and Joyce? It made sense. She ate, and the talked a little with Jane, and she idly wondered if the fact that Hopper and Joyce were on a date would mean that Jane and Will would become siblings at some point, like her and Billy were. Or, like her and Billy were supposed to be – *could* be, at least, if Billy wasn't being such an ass all the time.

She took a bite of her dinner and glanced into the living room area.

The boys had sat down in the sofa, an arm-length between them. The TV was on, but they weren't watching. Instead, they were turned so they were facing each other and seemed to be talking in low voices. Billy was sitting with his back to the kitchen, so Max couldn't see his face, but she could tell that he was more relaxed than she'd seen him today. Steve would say something and smile, and Billy would tilt his head and reply, and Steve's eyes would crinkle with mirth. And Billy, who was standing around awkwardly not ten minutes ago, now stretched out in the sofa next to Steve like he owned it. It was like all the tension and anger had bled out of him, leaving behind a softer version of Billy.

Was that Steve's doing? If so, Max wouldn't mind if they hung out every day.

Jane caught her looking and smiled while scraping the last of the chocolate sauce from her plate.

"Date", she whispered again, and this time, something in her voice made Max frown. Jane didn't say much, but she'd learned long ago that what Jane *did* say, was worth taking seriously. Jane noticed a lot of things that no one else did.

Max looked over to the sofa, where Steve and Billy were. Had they moved closer together, or was it just in her imagination? Could Jane have meant—?

Just then, Billy stiffened and turned to the kitchen, eyes wide.

"Shit", he said. "Steve, I'm so sorry."

Steve frowned. "What are you sorry for?"

"I fucked up, Steve. I didn't know you were the sitter!"

"What are you talking about? How did you fuck up?"

Billy hid his face in his hands and groaned. "I fed them every ounce of sugar I could find."

Silence followed, in which both Steve and Billy turned – slowly – to look at Max and Jane who were sitting with their empty plates by the

kitchen table. Max felt giddy – and sure, it could have been the sugar, but it could also be the beginning of some kind of realization – so she gave them a little wave and grinned evilly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jane mimic her.

Steve and Billy visibly paled.

3. Blackmail

Billy was lounging in the sofa, watching TV without actually paying attention to it and smoking a cigarette even though Susan – through Neil, probably – would kill him if she saw him smoking in the living room. But Susan wasn't here now. Neither was Neil.

Despite this, there were a lot of things Billy would rather be doing right now; stab himself in the eye with a fork, for example. The reason?

"*Billyyyyyy!*"

A whiny little red-head bitch. Which was also – unfortunately – his goblin of a step-sister.

"Shut up. I'm not taking you to the arcade."

"But–"

"Dad left me in charge, and he said to stay in the house. So we're staying in the house."

"But they won't be back until tomorrow! If we go out for a little while, they won't have to know. They'll never find out."

Billy couldn't even remember how many times he'd thought that Neil wouldn't find out about something, only to be wrong. He wouldn't take any chances this time, just because Max wanted to go and see her nerdy friends.

He ignored the small voice in his head that said that if he left Max at the arcade for an hour or two, then maybe he could go visit Steve for a while ... Because knowing his luck, Susan would call the house at *that exact moment*, and no one would reply, and Billy would be in deep shit. So no. It simply wasn't worth the risk.

"We're staying in the house. End of discussion."

He took a drag of the cigarette and blew out smoke in her general direction without taking his eyes off the TV. He heard her frustrated

growl as she stomped off down the hallway. A second later, she slammed a door in the other end of the house. He winced, instinctively. She was lucky Neil wasn't home. Or, rather, *he* was lucky Neil wasn't home. Neil didn't like slamming doors (unless he was the one doing the slamming) and Billy's sure that Max's bad mood would somehow have ended up being his fault.

It probably *was* his fault, to be honest. Not that he cared. If he had to spend his Friday night miserable between these four walls, then it was only fair that she had to, as well. Misery loves company, or some shit like that. Not that he wanted her company. He'd be honestly grateful if she was pissed enough to just stay in her room and leave him alone for the rest of the night.

Half an hour passed, maybe, and Billy was practically dozing in front of the TV when there was a knock at the door. He dragged a hand over his face and got to his feet when it didn't sound like Max was going to come out of her room to answer it.

When he opened the door and saw who was standing there, he blinked. This had to be some kind of prank, because *Max wouldn't be that bold*.

"No", he said simply and slammed the door in Sinclair's face.

He'd just turned around to walk back to the living room when there was a second knock. He thought about ignoring it, but Max's head peeked around the corner and she asked, looking way too innocent to not have had anything to do with this, "Who was at the door?"

Billy's eyes narrowed. "Did you tell him to come here?"

"No." Max's eyes shifted to the side, which meant that she was definitely lying.

Another knock, which was ignored by both of them as Billy took a step towards her and hissed, "You can't have him come to the house! Dad would freak out if he knew!"

"He's not gonna know! We're alone here until tomorrow, Billy, and I don't feel like spending all that time with you!"

"Same, brat, which is why you'll fucking stay in your room!"

"Billy, *come on ...*" Max had come out into the hallway and was walking closer. "He never said that we weren't allowed to have people over. He only said to stay in the house!"

"And when are we ever allowed to have people over, *Maxine*? You know what would happen if dad found out? You can be so fucking stupid!" He turned and walked back to the door as Sinclair knocked a fourth time. "Just because dad and Susan isn't home, it doesn't mean you can just have your little boyfriend come over!"

Yanking the door open, he opened his mouth to tell Sinclair to fuck off, but the words got stuck in his throat when Sinclair – wide-eyed and looking like a deer in headlights – reached out the side and dragged a confused-looking Steve into Billy's field of vision.

"Uh", Steve said. "Hi?"

Billy's moth opened and closed, and then he promptly shut the door in both their faces.

Ignoring the protests from Sinclair and the way he could see Steve's hair through the yellow window in the door, he whirled around and pointed at Max, who was a few steps behind him.

"What the fuck, *Maxine*?" he hissed, low, as if Neil was around and could hear him.

"*What?*"

Billy stared at her like she was crazy. "What the *fuck* is he doing here?!"

"Lucas?" Max said innocently, and oooh how Billy wanted to strangle her right now. "He's here to visit me. Since he knows I don't wanna be alone here with you! So he came to visit me like a *good boyfriend*!"

Her stance was challenging, and there was a fire in her eyes that almost made Billy back down. Almost, but not completely. Because Billy had a fire in him, too.

"Not Sinclair, I know perfectly well what that twerp is doing here. I mean Steve!"

Max clenched her jaw, and something in her eyes turned defiant. "Maybe he's here to be a good boyfriend, too."

Billy's blood ran cold. Out of everything that could have come out of her mouth, that was the last thing he'd expected.

"What", he said, and it was barely above a whisper. His whole body was tense, so tense that he couldn't move.

Max seemed to hunch down a little, and she cast a worried look at the door behind him. "I mean ... I thought that ... You know, maybe I could hang with Lucas and you could hang with Steve ...?"

Thoughts swirling in his head, Billy couldn't even manage a coherent sentence. "You- what did you- Max, you can't!" He found himself shaking, and his heartbeat sounded like war drums in his ears.

"Billy?" And now Max sounded worried. "It's okay, I ... I won't tell."

He could barely hear her, the panic making him light-headed. Another knock at the door, and they both swirled around to stare at it.

Billy couldn't breathe. *She knew*. She was gonna tell her friends, and let something slip to Neil, and Billy was gonna die. Neil was gonna kill him. *She fucking knew*.

Something touched his hand, and he flinched so hard that he bumped into the wall. Looking down, he saw that Max was standing there with her hand outstretched. Slowly, she came closer and touched her hand to his. He wanted to slap it away, he wanted to sneer and say something mean, but –

– but Steve was outside the door, and Sinclair was outside the door, and Max *knew*, and Billy was so fucked.

"I won't tell Neil", Max said, softly, squeezing his hand. Then she gave him a meaningful look and raised her eyebrows. "If you don't."

"Huh?"

"I won't tell Neil about Steve being here", she clarified. "If you don't tell him about *Lucas* being here."

This was blackmail! Billy was being *blackmailed*.

The realization strangely made him snap out of his panic. Blackmail, he could deal with.

He snatched his hand out of Max's and straightened up. Looked her over with narrowed eyes. She knew about Steve. She said *boyfriend*, and she meant it. She definitely knew. If Neil found out, Billy would be dead. But maybe – maybe Neil *didn't* have to find out. Because Max knew about Billy and Steve, but Billy knew about her and Sinclair, too.

The two of them were too busy staring at each other to care about yet another, somewhat impatient-sounding, knock at the door.

"You don't tell Neil about Steve", Billy eventually hissed. "And I don't tell him about Sinclair. If Neil finds out about either, we're both dead, do you understand?"

Him more than Max, probably, and they both knew it. But Max nodded.

"Do we have a deal?" Billy said. He needed her to say it.

She spit in her hand and held it out for him to shake. "Deal."

He leaned away from her outstretched hand with a look of horror on his face. "What the fuck, Maxine?"

She had the nerve to look offended. "It's like a blood oath, without the blood!"

He turned back to the door, but looking at her over his shoulder as if she'd sprouted a second head. "It's *disgusting*, is what it is."

When he yanked the door open, Steve was still standing there, and Sinclair was standing next to him with his hand raised as if to knock

again. Billy's eyes narrowed, Sinclair's widened, and Steve just smiled.

"Hi", he said as if they hadn't just been left standing on the porch for a couple of minutes.

"Get in", Billy said between clenched teeth and without taking his eyes off Sinclair, who – he was pleased to note – kept Steve between Billy and himself the entire time. Maybe he wasn't *quite* as stupid as Billy had thought, after all.

Max saved her boyfriend from Billy's stare by grabbing his hand and dragging him towards her room.

"Keep the door open!" Billy yelled after them.

"Oh my god, *whatever!*" was Max's reply. But the door to her room didn't fully close after they disappeared inside, so Billy had no reason to storm after them.

Instead, he closed the front door, and then he sagged against Steve and leaned his head against his boyfriend's chest. Steve laughed and – after only a few seconds hesitation – patted him on the head.

"What was that about?"

Billy groaned. "I'm dead, Steve."

Steve hummed and put an arm around him. "You look pretty okay for a dead guy."

Billy turned his head so he could glare at Steve. "I look more than okay!"

"Hey, I *did* say you were pretty."

"You said I look *pretty okay*, Steve. That's not the same thing."

"Fine, fine. *You're pretty*. Happy?"

"No", Billy said. When he spoke next, it was in a whisper, while pulling Steve by the hand into the living room. "She knows, Steve.

Max knows!"

"Knows what?"

Billy looked down pointedly at their intertwined fingers.

"Oh."

"Yeah – *oh*."

They sat down in the sofa, still holding hands, and Steve absent-mindedly rubbed his thumb over Billy's hand. "Well, I'm sure that if you ask her to keep it quiet, she won't tell anyone."

Billy leveled him with another look. "She hates me."

"She doesn't hate you. You've been much more bearable lately!"

"Well that's just because—" Billy started, but snapped his mouth shut before he could finish.

"What?" Steve prompted, and smiled when Billy's cheeks started to redden.

"Nothing."

"Come on. It's because ... what?"

Billy lurched forward so his forehead rested against Steve's chest again. When he spoke, it was muffled in Steve's sweater. "You."

Steve's smile broadened. "You're more bearable because of me?"

"I don't know!" Billy said, still to Steve's chest. "It's just ... easier with you."

"What is?"

Billy glanced up. "Everything."

Steve put a hand on the back of his head and leaned down to give him the gentlest of kisses. Billy could feel him smiling against his lips, and got all warm – not just his cheeks this time, although he was

sure he was still blushing. *Dammit.*

The mood was broken by an obnoxious voice from the doorway.

"I don't see why Lucas and I have to keep the door open if *you're* the ones who're gonna be disgusting."

Billy and Steve sprung apart; Billy straightened up in the sofa, and Steve floundered like a fish out of water, trying and failing to look casual. Max looked smug, the little creep, but Sinclair was thankfully nowhere to be seen.

"Go shut the damn door", Billy said between clenched teeth.

"I will", Max replied, looking like a cat who just knocked something off the table and was proud of it. "I was just getting drinks for me and Lucas."

With that, she strutted towards the kitchen, and Billy chanced a look at Steve. Steve looked ruffled, but not panicked, and there was a faint blush tainting his cheeks now, too. Billy decided that he liked it.

"Sinclair!" he bellowed in the general direction of the hallway.

A couple of seconds passed, and then Sinclair peeked out from the doorway, just in time for Max to get back, carrying two sodas.

"If you touch her", Billy said, slowly, "I will kill you."

Sinclair's eyebrows shot up and he actually took a step back from Max. Steve snorted, and added, "He means if you touch her *inappropriately.*"

Sinclair's eyes flitted from Steve to Max to Billy, and while Billy shrugged, his eyes still said "*no I don't*". Sinclair visibly gulped. Max took pity on him and pulled him from the doorway with a roll of her eyes and a "Come on Lucas, let's leave these losers alone."

When they were gone, Billy raised an eyebrow.

"You undermining my authority with my sister, Harrington?"

"Nope", Steve said, unapologetically, "I'm making sure you don't give the kid a heart-attack. Wouldn't wanna do that to your future brother-in-law."

Billy punched him in the arm. "What?! No! Ew!"

Steve laughed while Billy made fake gagging noises. "Why would you say that? You're a *horrible* boyfriend."

At that, Steve's laugh tapered off and his grin softened into a smile – a smile just for Billy. And Billy, who had never been able to resist those smiles, couldn't help but return it.

"If it makes you feel better", Steve said in a low voice, gently dragging a finger down Billy's arm, "I'll help you kill anyone who touches her in a bad way. I've lived in Hawkins all my life, I know lots of places to hide a body."

Now it was Billy's turn to laugh.

"I take it back", he said, leaning in to give Steve a quick kiss on the lips. "You're a *good* boyfriend."

4. A Fierce Little Thing

"Billy! Billy, you have to help me, man!"

Billy felt a stab of fear at the urgency in Steve's voice.

"What? What's going on?" He was already walking as far as the phone's cord would allow him, reaching for the jacket he'd thrown over a chair earlier.

"Mrs. Sinclair wants me to babysit tonight!"

Billy stopped. "Okay? So what? You've babysat those brats a thousand times."

"You don't understand!" came Steve's almost frantic voice from the other end. "She wants me to babysit *Erica!* Lucas' little sister!"

Billy grinned, even though Steve couldn't see him. "Well I'm sure you two will have fun together. You can have a girl's night."

"Fuck you, man. You have to help me! Mrs. Sinclair said I could bring a friend if I wanted to - so you're coming, too!"

"What? No way."

"Come on, Billy. I know nothing about little girls!"

"And you think I *do*?"

"You have a sister!"

Billy leveled the wall with a deadpan look that he wished he could give Steve. "Max is the *least* girly one out of all those nerds."

Steve faltered a bit. Probably because he recognized the truth in that statement.

"Billy, *please*!"

"No way, man. Not a chance. Do you remember what happened the

last time we were babysitting?"

"You mean at your house, or ...?"

"No, you moron. That wasn't babysitting, that was *hanging out*. I mean at the Chief's place."

"Well, yeah. I blew you in your car."

Billy had to fight down the urge to smile - that had been a nice and unexpected end of the day, for sure. But also not what he was talking about.

"I mean before that. It was literal *hell*, Steve - they were high on sugar the whole evening!"

"Only because *you* gave it to them!"

Which was ... true.

"Come on, Billy. You owe me!"

Billy just *knew* that Steve was giving him puppy eyes, even though he couldn't see it. He could hear it in the other boy's voice - and how that could be so effective over the phone, he had no idea. Damn him, but he had a hard time denying Steve anything, even if he liked to put up a token effort before he caved.

Steve, probably sensing that he was wearing Billy down, hurried to add, "I'll make it worth your while."

And, well. How was Billy supposed to say no to that?

"Okay, *fine*."

"Yes! Oh my god, I love you man, thanks!"

Billy blushed – good thing he was home alone, with no one there to see – like he always did when Steve just blurted out things like that. The words that Billy struggled with saying out loud every time (even though he *felt* them in his *bones*) sounded so effortless spilling from Steve's lips.

To distract himself from the sudden warm and tight feeling in his chest, he cleared his throat and asked, "So, what time?"

"I have to be there in half an hour, but I know it's short notice. You can come by at any time."

"Yeah, no. I mean, I'll be there."

"Okay", Steve said, and Billy could hear the smile in his voice. "I'll see you there."

When Billy got out of his car outside the Sinclair home, forty-five minutes later, he was clutching a plastic bag in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. The cigarette, he dropped to the ground and crushed with his shoe, before he took a deep breath and walked up the few steps to knock on the door.

Steve threw the door open with an almost haunted expression on his face, and gave Billy a relieved smile when he saw him standing there. "Oh thank god", he muttered. Over his shoulder, he said – in a voice *way* too chipper to be sincere – "Hey Erica, this is my friend, Billy, that I told you about."

He reached out and dragged Billy over the threshold without so much as a "hello". Billy stumbled inside and found himself in a light and spacious hallway, face to face with a serious-looking girl who was watching the two of them with dark eyes.

"Billy, this is Erica", Steve said from behind Billy, with a hand on his shoulder as if to keep him from running.

Billy looked at Erica. Erica looked right back. None of them spoke for a long time, and Billy could practically *hear* Steve sweat nervously behind him.

"So", Erica finally said. "*You're* Billy."

"Yup", Billy answered.

"I've *heard* about you", she continued, and the way she said it made Billy wonder *what* exactly she'd heard. To be honest, it could be a lot

of things. Most of them bad.

"I've heard about you too", he said, which wasn't a lie, exactly. Lucas had probably complained about her in Billy's presence at some point, and Steve had mentioned her on the phone less than an hour ago.

They kept staring at each other.

"You attacked my brother last year", she said and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Billy managed to resist mirroring her; instead he let his arms hang by his side to seem as unthreatening as possible.

"I did."

She rolled her head at him and said, "Then what makes you think you're welcome here?"

Billy wordlessly held out the plastic bag and waited until she hesitantly reached out to take it. She gave him a suspicious look, then peeked inside the bag. When she looked up again, her eyes were calculating.

"This for me?" she said.

"Yup."

Her face split in a wide grin, looking nothing like it had only a second ago. "Then welcome to my house, Billy! Nice to meet you."

His lips twitched. "Nice to meet you too, Erica."

She turned and skipped into what looked like it could be a kitchen, but before she disappeared around the corner, she turned around and pointed at Billy.

"Don't touch my brother again, though", she said seriously.

"I won't", Billy promised.

Then he and Steve were alone in the hallway. Billy let out a sigh of

relief, which was thankfully drowned out by Steve's groaning.

"Oh my god, what even *was* that? I thought you were gonna get in a fight or something for a second!"

Billy scoffed. "You're an idiot. What do you take me for, a monster? I'm not gonna fight a little girl."

"That's because you'd probably lose", Steve muttered and put his head on Billy's shoulder from behind him.

Billy shrugged. "Probably", he admitted. "She's a fierce little thing, that one."

"No shit", Steve agreed. "She's scary."

"Mm."

"Hey, what was in the bag?"

Billy turned around so he could see Steve's face, and grinned. "A bunch of girly stuff – makeup and hair things and shit like that. Figured that'd do the trick."

"Where did you get that?"

"Swiped it from Maxine's stash."

"Won't she miss it?"

Billy laughed. "Are you kidding me? She'll probably thank me! Every birthday, every Christmas, Susan buys her a bunch of that stuff, and Max never wants any of it. She hides it under her bed, so Susan won't find it and be reminded that it exists and make her use it."

"That was some quick thinking", Steve said and wrapped his arms around Billy, pulling him closer. "I'm impressed."

Billy nuzzled his neck, still smiling. "Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. I'm so glad you came. Having you here will make tonight so much easier."

At that exact moment, there was a loud voice coming from the kitchen. "Hey assholes! Am I gonna have to babysit *myself* here, or what?"

They broke apart, and Billy chuckled at the look on Steve's face. "Maybe not *easier*, per se ..."

They walked into the kitchen to see that Erica had placed all the content of the bag on the kitchen table and was now tapping her foot impatiently. When they entered, she eyed them with a considering look on her face – or more accurately; she eyed their hair. Billy was the first to realize her intentions.

"Oh *hell* no", he said, shaking his head. "Steve volunteers!"

Steve looked confused. "Volunteers for what?"

But Erica was already grinning and pulling out a chair for Steve to sit in.

When Mrs. Sinclair came home later that evening, she had to hide her smile behind her hand at the sight that met her. Steve Harrington was sitting in a chair by the kitchen counter, his face an unflattering rainbow of colors due to the eyeshadow, rouge and lipstick that had been applied to it. Erica was seated in a chair next to him, not even looking up to greet her mother - fully concentrated on painting the nails on Steve's left hand (his right had already received that treatment, judging by the colors of his nails and the way he splayed his fingers over his knee, seemingly afraid to move). Behind Steve, Billy Hargrove was seated on the kitchen counter, and was currently busy putting various braids and hair clips in Steve's hair.

"Oh my", Mrs. Sinclair said.

Steve blushed a bright red – that did *not* go well with the purple eyeshadow that he was currently wearing – and Billy Hargrove looked up, grinning, and greeted her politely. "Hello Mrs. Sinclair."

"It ... looks like you guys had fun?"

Steve still didn't seem to have gotten over his mortification enough to

form words, and Erica just nodded.

"Oh yes", Billy therefore said. "So much fun. Say, Mrs. Sinclair ... you don't happen to have a camera laying around, do you?"

Mrs. Sinclair couldn't help the snort that escaped her at the betrayed look Steve threw over his shoulder at the blonde boy.

"You know what?" she said, "I think I just might."

5. Shovel Talk

Steve had always liked Mrs Henderson. She had always seemed to be such a warm and happy person, that he simply couldn't help himself; if he saw her in town, he'd say hello, and if he met her at the store, there was a big chance he'd help her carry her groceries to her car. So Steve had endeared himself to Mrs Henderson long before he started hanging out with her son.

When he basically adopted Dustin as a little brother, though, that's when he climbed to the top of the list of Mrs Henderson's favorite people. Especially as Steve didn't mind keeping an eye on Dustin during the few times when Mrs Henderson needed a babysitter.

Which was the case right now.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am, Steve", she said over the phone. "My sister really has the worst of luck – breaking her leg like that, and with her husband out of the country! And Dustin doesn't want to come with me, of course. He'd rather stay at home with his friends, he's in that age when it's not cool to visit your aunt, I suppose. But he'll be delighted that you're coming over! I'll make sure to leave some cookies out for the two of you."

Mrs Henderson, Steve suspected, was trying to fatten him up. She always seemed to have newly baked goods when he came over, and more often than not he came home afterwards with leftovers.

He smiled into the phone. "It's no problem, Mrs Henderson, it'll be fun. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, yes, I'll see you tomorrow, thanks again."

They said their goodbyes, and Steve went back upstairs. Only a couple of minutes passed, though, before the phone rang again. This time when Steve replied, it was Dustin on the other end.

"Did mom ask you to babysit tomorrow?" he asked without preamble.

"Hello to you too", Steve muttered. "Yeah, why? Did she change her

mind?"

"No, she ... uh ... I wanted to ask if ..."

Dustin trailed off, but Steve wouldn't have it. "Well? Spit it out."

"Can you bring Billy tomorrow?"

Steve stared, but of course Dustin couldn't see him. "I'm sorry, what? I must have misheard you, because it sounded like you said that you wanted me to bring Billy to your house tomorrow."

"That's what I said!"

"But ... why? You hate him!"

Dustin spluttered. "I don't *hate* him, Steve, I just—"

"You say that you hate him just about every time you see him."

"Well maybe things have *changed*, Steve!" Dustin exclaimed, and continued in a much lower voice, "Or maybe they haven't. I don't know."

Steve wasn't sure if he was meant to have heard that or not. "What?"

"Look, can you bring him or not?"

Steve dragged a hand through his hair. "I mean, I can ask him, but ... Why do you want him to come?"

"I have to ask him something."

"But wh—"

"Okay Steve, thanks, I'll see you guys tomorrow!"

"Uh, okay, bye?" Steve said, but Dustin had already hung up on him.

Steve closed his eyes and took a deep breath, before glancing at his watch. It was still too early for Neil to have gotten home from work. He might as well call Billy right away and ask if he wanted to come to the Hendersons tomorrow, for whatever reason.

The next day, around lunch, Billy picked Steve up in his Camaro, and drove them both over to Dustin's house. Or, as Billy said, "*Mrs Henderson's house*, Steve. I doubt that Dustin owns it."

They rang the doorbell, and Mrs Henderson opened the door and brightened when she saw that it was Steve.

"Steve, you're here!" Then she spotted Billy, and her smile didn't dim one bit. "And you brought your friend! William, was it?"

"Billy, ma'am", Billy said with a smile.

"Welcome, both of you. Don't just stand there, come in, come in ..." She ushered them inside while she kept talking. "I really should be going, but I'm glad you got here before I had to go. Dustin's in his room—" She turned her back to them to yell down the hallway; "Dustin! Your friends are here!" And then she bent down and picked up a cat who had appeared by her feet, only to distractedly hand it to Steve to hold while she put her coat on.

Steve found himself with an armful of resisting cat, and looked over to see Billy grin at him. He mouthed 'help me' when Mrs Henderson wasn't looking, while trying to keep the cat from clawing his face. Billy rolled his eyes, but easily plucked the cat from Steve's grip and started scratching it on its head. The cat immediately calmed down and made itself comfortable in Billy's arms. Steve would be jealous, if he didn't know first-hand how calming Billy's hands could be. When Mrs Henderson saw Billy with her cat, she absolutely melted – Steve could *see* it. And, glancing over, he had to admit that his boyfriend and his new fuzzy friend painted a pretty picture. (He made a mental note to tell Billy, later. Nothing annoyed Billy as much as being called 'cute', and he was even cuter with his feathers ruffled.)

Dustin appeared in the hallway, looking surly at the sight of Billy. Steve half-expected a comment along the lines of "He's not my friend!" or something, since Dustin was normally very vocal about his dislike of Billy, but to his surprise, the only thing he said this time was; "I thought you were in a hurry, mom?"

Mrs Henderson, who was currently cooing over the cat that Billy was

holding, blinked at this and glanced at her watch.

"Oh dear, yes, I really should be on my way. There's freshly baked cookies in the kitchen, and I made a pie that you can have for dinner – it's in the fridge."

She whirled around the hallway and picked up her bag before rounding on Dustin and smacking a big kiss on his forehead. Then she turned to Steve and patted him affectionately on the cheek, before doing the same to Billy.

"You boys have fun now, and I'll be back tonight. Bye!"

And then she was out the door, leaving three silent boys in her wake. Steve glanced over at Billy – the blonde had reached up to touch the cheek where Mrs Henderson just patted him, and he looked confused.

And *adorable*, but Steve didn't say that out loud – he had *some* survival instinct, after all.

Dustin didn't seem to find him adorable in the least, though. He was glaring between Steve and Billy, and when Steve met his eyes and opened his mouth to ask why they were even here, Dustin let out a long-suffering sigh and said, "Follow me".

He turned and walked into the living room. Steve and Billy looked at each other and then followed him; Billy still holding the cat.

Dustin placed himself on a high chair, and motioned for them to sit in the sofa on the other side of the coffee table. Steve noticed that it placed them at about the same height, and wondered if it was intentional.

When they had sat down, and Billy had gotten comfortable with the cat in his lap, Dustin straightened up and cleared his throat.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I called you here today", he started, formally, and then said nothing else.

"Uh", Steve said. "Sure?"

Dustin's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, before he

seemed to steel himself. He turned to Billy and blurted, "What are your intentions with Steve?"

Everyone froze.

Steve held his breath and stared at Dustin, Dustin looked ready to bolt at any time but – to his credit – didn't take his eyes off Billy, and Billy himself stared back at Dustin with an unreadable expression. None of them moved until the cat apparently got impatient, and head-butted Billy's hand to make him resume his petting duties. Billy absent-mindedly did.

"What are you talking about?" he said, sounding as casual as ever. But Steve *knew* him; he heard the tremor in his voice and knew that it meant that Billy was freaking out, so he discreetly put his hand on Billy's leg to calm him down.

Only, of course Dustin noticed, and stared pointedly at Steve's hand. "Cut the crap."

"Hey, language!"

Dustin ignored him. "You know what I'm talking about. You've been ... you've been *compromising* Steve, and I want to know what your intentions are with him!"

Steve spluttered. "Compr– *What?* Dustin, I'm not a damsel in distress!"

Dustin kept ignoring him; probably emboldened by his lack of being dead already, he leaned forward in his chair – the poor thing was undoubtedly trying to be intimidating – and pointed his finger at Billy.

"Because I'll have you know that if you're ... if you're just *playing with his feelings*, that's a real shit thing to do. And if you hurt him, I'll ... I'll hurt you, too! I *know* people!"

"*Dustin!*" Steve admonished, aghast. He couldn't believe this was happening. This was so surreal. He was gonna kill the kid, if Billy didn't beat him to it.

To his eternal surprise, though, Billy didn't move from his seat. He

actually seemed to relax back against the cushions, and when Steve glanced over he saw that although Billy's eyes were narrowed, he was also suppressing a smile.

"You really wanna know my intentions, kid?"

Dustin looked grim, but nodded.

The cat twisted in Billy's lap, and Billy started running his fingers through the fur on its belly (and Steve was *not* jealous of a cat) while it started purring loudly. When Billy spoke next, he didn't look away from Dustin.

"I intend on spending as much time with Steve as possible, for as long as he'll let me."

Steve's thoughts screeched to a halt, and he turned his head and stared at his boyfriend, slack-jawed as Billy continued.

"I intend on getting the hell out of this town eventually, and take Steve with me – but if he wants to stay here, I'll stay, too. I will stand between him and anyone who wants to do him harm, but I'll never get between him and the people who are important to him. Steve is the most important person in my life, and I'd do just about anything for him. I would die for him and I would kill for him, but if he ever wanted me to leave, I would do so in a heartbeat, just because he asked me to."

Steve couldn't breathe. He felt heat rising in his cheeks, and he couldn't take his eyes off Billy, who was still staring Dustin down.

"I would rather kill myself than hurt him again. And if I have any say in the matter, I intend on spending the rest of my life with him – if he'll have me."

Billy sounded serious. Steve had never heard him sound so serious before. And a second later, when the words Billy said sank in, Steve felt ... overwhelmed. Overcome with some kind of emotion that he couldn't define. His heart felt too big for his chest, and he didn't know if he wanted to hide his blush behind a pillow, or jump into Billy's lap and kiss him senseless. Possibly both.

"And if you're asking for my more *immediate* intentions", Billy continued, and now there was a familiar purr in his voice that usually meant trouble, "then I intend to take him home to his big and empty house tonight, and as soon as we get inside I'm going to push him up against the door and blow him until he can't see straight. Then, I'll take him upstairs and let him—"

"Okay!" Dustin shouted at the same time as Steve threw out a hand to put it over Billy's mouth, suddenly mortified. He could *feel* Billy smirking under his hand.

"Okay, Jesus Christ ..." Dustin was squirming in his seat, face beet red. He wouldn't look any of them in the eye.

Steve's face was probably as red, too. He cautiously removed his hand from Billy's face, and Billy asked, "Does that answer your question?", as if what he'd said was nothing out of the ordinary.

"I regret *everything*", Dustin muttered and slunk off his chair. "Yes, you monster. God, please never talk to me again." He turned his back to leave them when Billy smirked.

"You asked."

"And now I regret it!"

"Let that be a lesson then, kid. Don't invite trouble you're not prepared for."

Dustin just groaned, and Billy looked like the cat who got the cream.

Speaking of inviting. Steve had to know. "You could have asked this any time. Why did you want him to come *here, now?*" When they were stuck together under the same roof for several awkward hours, until Mrs Henderson came home. Ugh, this was shaping up to be a *long day*.

Dustin threw out his arms in frustration, clearly wanting to leave but at the same time reluctant to leave the two of them alone in his living room after everything he'd just learned.

"I thought he was less likely to kill me in my own home, okay?!"

"Well that's just stupid", Billy commented. "Don't you know that most people who are murdered are killed at home?"

Steve and Dustin both turned towards him, gaping, until Dustin shook himself out of staring and answered, voice tinted with hysteria, "No, but *now* I do! *What?!* *Why do you even know that?*"

Billy calmly scratched the cat under its chin and shrugged. "I read."

Dustin gave Steve a look that said 'can you believe this guy' before he looked up, took a deep breath, and then stalked off into the hallway.

"Dustin!" Steve said, feeling bad. He was supposed to look after him, after all.

"No, Steve! I need to be alone! Holy crap ..."

They could hear him stomping off and muttering until a door slammed shut in the other end of the house. Only silence followed.

The silence was *loud*. Steve glanced over, but only got so far as to the cat in Billy's lap, and Billy's fingers carding through its fur. The cat looked pleased as pie, and Steve imagined that Billy had a similar expression on his face. He was therefore surprised – when he finally gathered enough courage to look up – when he found Billy looking ... nervous. Eyes flickering between Steve's face, the cat, and the floor.

"Did you mean it?" Steve eventually asked, voice low.

Billy licked his lips and lifted one shoulder. "About the blowjob? Sure. I–"

"Billy."

Billy bit his lip. When he spoke again, it was almost a whisper. "Every word."

He wouldn't look at Steve, and Steve suddenly wanted nothing but to look him in the eyes. Gently, he reached out and turned Billy's face towards him.

"I mean", Billy babbled, "sure, I wanted to stick it to the kid but ..."

He shrugged. "What I said? I mean, you knew all that stuff already, anyway. Right?"

And finally, finally he looked up, eyes impossibly sincere. Steve felt like he could drown in them.

"Right", he said softly, and saw Billy sag in relief in front of him. "I mean, I didn't know that part about the murders, but ..."

"Shut up", Billy murmured and leaned in for a kiss. Steve was more than happy to comply, especially when Billy's hands ended up gently holding his face, as if Steve was something precious.

"Me too", he whispered, and Billy made a tiny noise in the back of his throat and kissed him again. The cat decided it had had enough and jumped off Billy's lap, which suited Steve just fine as that meant he could lean even closer without the risk of getting scratched.

They were rudely interrupted by a groan from the doorway.

"Oh my god, *stop being gross on my couch!*"

They sprung apart, and Steve could feel his face heat up again – but this time he watched Billy, and saw that his cheeks, too, were tainted pink. God, he loved it when he could get Billy to blush.

"Dustin! Um ... "

"I have opened Pandora's box and I *have so many regrets!*" Dustin lamented, and added on his way to the kitchen; "No cookies for you guys! I'm taking all of them. You don't deserve them."

Steve and Billy looked down. Billy was biting his lip, and Steve could feel a hysterical laughter bubble up from his chest.

"We should probably go talk to him ... ask him not to say anything to anyone ..."

"Yeah, no", Billy said. "If you don't want him to squeal, you should probably ask him alone. If I'm there, he'll tell everyone out of spite."

"No, he-", Steve started saying, but then he thought about it for less

than a second and changed his mind. "Yeah, you're right." He stood up. "I'll be right back."

Billy stretched out in the sofa. "Bring me back some cookies."

6. Sick Day

"I don't want to leave you here by yourself."

Steve looked down at Billy, who was blinking blearily up at his boyfriend from where he was lying in Steve's bed. Even though he was covered by every blanket Steve could find, he was still shivering, and his eyes were glossy with fever.

"Mmm'kay", Billy murmured and closed his eyes, burrowing deeper into the pillow.

"What? Babe, what did you say?"

Billy sighed, eyes still closed, and licked his dry lips.

"I'm", he said. "Gunna be 'kay."

Steve frowned. He reached out to run his fingers through Billy's tangled curls, and could feel the heat radiating off his skin. Billy relaxed when Steve gently raked his fingernails over the back of his head, and made a little displeased noise when Steve eventually withdrew.

"I'm sorry", Steve said. "I have to go. But Billy –"

He waited, and when he didn't get a reaction, he gently shook Billy by the shoulders. Billy turned bleary eyes on Steve, who pointed to the bedside table.

"– there is water and juice right here. You have Tylenol and fruit, and I put the phone close enough for you to reach. I taped the phone number to the hotel to the phone, and I want you to call *immediately* if you want me to come back. I don't care how important this is to my parents – one call from you, and I'm out of there, okay?"

"Mm."

"Did you get all that, babe?"

Billy lolled his head in something that was probably supposed to be a

nod, and tried to look serious. It was ruined by his inability to focus his eyes properly, and Steve couldn't help but smile affectionately.

"Come on, you need to use your words, so I know you understand."

"Fu'off. Tha's two wor's."

Steve smiled softly, and leaned in to place a kiss on Billy's temple.

"I don't want to go."

"ra good boyfrien'."

Steve huffed out a laugh and put his forehead to Billy's.

"I feel like the worst boyfriend ever. Leaving you alone when you're sick."

Billy's eyes fluttered shut.

"Better'en bein' home."

Steve smiled, but it was brittle. He gently ran the back of his fingers over Billy's cheek one last time before he stood up. Billy didn't seem to notice – he looked to be asleep already.

Steve turned the light off, but didn't close the door all the way. He grabbed his coat and his car keys, and went for the front door. Just before leaving, though, he hesitated. Went back into the kitchen and grabbed the phone from the wall. Dug through the little phone book next to the phone to find the right number, dialed it, and waited until someone answered.

"Hello, Joyce? This is Steve, sorry to call on you like this ..."

Joyce had been surprised when Steve called her at work – because even after everything they'd gone through, and how close he seemed to be with Will's group of friends (and – perhaps strangely, all things considered – Nancy and Jonathan) they didn't have that kind of relationship – and at first she'd thought something was wrong.

The real surprise came when she understood what he was asking.

"– and he's just sick, you know, and I'm letting him stay at my place but my parents are expecting me to go to this thing and I just hate leaving him alone, so ... I was wondering if you wouldn't mind ... maybe checking in on him on your way home from work?"

She didn't answer, too overwhelmed by his stream of words to form a reply. He must have taken her silence as hesitation, because he continued.

"I mean, you don't have to stay, just maybe make sure he's still in bed and, you know, *breathing*–"

"Steve", Joyce interrupted, finally silencing him. "Of course I'll check in on your friend."

From what she'd heard, that friend was the same boy who had acted like an asshole to Will's friends and beaten Steve bloody just last year – and, she realized with a jolt, broken one of her plates over his head – but things changed so quickly when you were a teenager. Enemies one day, friends the next. Nothing was written in stone when you were seventeen. She knew that better than most.

"Thank you", Steve sighed, and she could hear the relief in his voice. "You know where I live?"

"Yes, Steve", she said wryly – everyone in Hawkins knew where the Harringtons lived, and she had even been over a couple of times, years ago.

"Okay, so I'm leaving the key in the big flower pot to the left of the door. The first one. And then when you get inside, Billy's in my room, that's the first on the right on the second floor. Maybe just ... refill his water, or whatever? I don't–"

"Why Steve", Joyce couldn't help but tease him. "It's like you think I don't know how to take care of a sick boy. What kind of mother do you take me for?"

There was a momentary silence on the other end, and Joyce was suddenly reminded of an offhand comment someone had made

recently, about how Steve's parents spent so much time out of Hawkins. Before she had the chance to say anything, though, Steve chuckled a little over the phone.

"Sorry, Joyce. I'm just ... Thank you."

"No problems, hun. Do you want me to check in on him tomorrow before I start working, as well?"

"Would you? That would be great, thank you so much."

After exchanging pleasantries, and after she'd made Steve promise to come over for dinner some time – she said he could bring his friend, which startled a nervous laugh out of him – they hung up, and she went back to work.

When she drove her little car up the Harringtons' fancy driveway after work, she felt a little intimidated at the size of the place, even though she quickly shook it off. She grabbed the plastic bag she'd packed at work in one hand, found the key Steve had left for her, and let herself in.

It seemed to be the kind of house where you took your shoes off when you entered, so she did that before taking the stairs up to the second floor.

There were a couple of lights on here and there, but overall the house was pretty dark. The door to Steve's room was slightly ajar, and there was no lamps on at all in there. The only light in the room was coming in through the blinds. Instead of turning the overhead lamp on, Joyce opened the door fully to let in the light from the hallway. She saw a bundle on the bed, and walked closer.

The bundle revealed itself to be a boy, covered in blankets up to his nose. His eyes were closed and he didn't stir even when she put her hand on his forehead. He was warm, and his skin felt clammy. Definitely a fever, then.

On the bedside table, there was an array of items that made Joyce smile. She had half of those things in her bag, in case Steve hadn't

thought of them, but she was starting to realize that Steve cared enough about this boy to not take any chances; what with him calling her at work to make sure someone checked in on him, and all.

It made her care a little, too. She reached out a hand to turn on the lamp on the table. The sudden light made the boy frown a little, but he didn't otherwise react, which was ... a little worrying, actually.

"Billy?"

She shook him gently by the shoulder, but all he did was furrow his brow and let out a breath in something like a sigh. So she shook him again, more insistently, and was rewarded when his eyes fluttered open. But he didn't seem to see her. He just blinked against the light and made a little sound in the back of his throat.

She put her hand on his forehead again, and was surprised when he seemed to melt under her touch; relaxing and closing his eyes again.

"Billy?" she tried again. "How are you feeling? Do you want some water?"

He didn't actually reply, but he tried to look up at her so she took it as a 'yes'. She poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand and then helped him tilt his head up so he could drink from it. She thought he looked aware enough, but when he'd swallowed a couple of mouthfuls, he licked his lips, looked her in the eye and said, "Mom?" in a voice so small it broke her heart.

"No, honey, I'm not your mom", she said, a little unsteadily, and ran a thumb over his cheek. He leaned into her touch, perhaps without conscious thought, and looked a little confused. "But I'm going to take care of you, don't you worry. Have you eaten today?"

He just kept looking at her as if he knew her, and she gave him a weak smile.

"You just rest a little more, and I'm going to go and see if I can't whip up some soup for you, okay? Go back to sleep, I'll wake you up in a minute."

He was way more pliable than his reputation had led her to expect,

but then again – he didn't seem to be all that aware of his surroundings at the moment. She brushed his hair out of his face and watched his eyes close before she stood up and exited the room.

The first thing she did was to locate the phone in the kitchen and call home, telling Jonathan that she had to take care of something after work and might be home late, and could he please make dinner for himself and Will? Jonathan agreed, like Joyce knew he would, and she smiled to herself as she hung up the phone.

The second thing she did was to bring her bag into the Harringtons' big kitchen and snoop through their cupboards and their refrigerator. She had soup to make.

It was after eleven that night when Joyce heard someone fumbling with a key at the front door. She put down her cup of tea on the kitchen table and went to meet whoever it was, so that she wouldn't frighten them – but when she got out into the hallway, she was met with Steve, who was wearing a fancy coat and was just putting his keys away in a little bowl on a table. He startled when he saw her, and then immediately blushed.

"Joyce! I ... didn't think you'd still be here!"

"Sorry if I scared you."

"No, no ..." Steve said as he shrugged out of his coat, eyes drifting to the stairs. "But ... why? I mean, he's ... he's okay, right?"

"Yeah", Joyce said, "he's okay. I think his fever has gone down a bit, actually. I've made him drink lots of water, and I managed to make him eat some soup – there's leftovers in the fridge, if you want, for later."

Steve smiled, relieved. "That's great, Joyce, thank you. But ... You shouldn't have stayed. I mean, what if you get sick now, I wouldn't want to–"

She waved his concern away. "I was sick last week – got it from Will, who got it from someone in school, probably. This thing has been

going around for a while. I probably won't catch it again."

"I hope not", Steve said, a little awkwardly and glanced at the stairs again. Joyce could feel his need to go up and check on his friend, so she smiled and patted his shoulder.

"Why are you home so early though? I thought you said you wouldn't be home until tomorrow?"

Steve shrugged and opened his mouth, but didn't seem to be able to come up with an answer right away. Joyce struggled not to let her amusement show, and to keep her face neutral. In the end, she saved him by continuing, "Well, I should be heading home. I was actually on my way already, I was just going to check up on Billy one more time before leaving. But now when you're here, you can do it."

Steve smiled in relief. "I will, Joyce, thanks again. I really appreciate it, and just let me know if there's ever anything I can do to help."

"Oh, Steve", she said and patted his cheek. "You do enough already. Always driving those kids around, keeping an eye on them. This was no trouble, really. Now go, check on your friend. I'll let myself out."

His smile widened. "Thanks. Have a good night."

"You too."

She took her time to get ready. Picked up the items she'd put on the counter and put them back in her bag, cleaned her teacup and put it away where she took it, wiped off the counter. When she was ready to go, she remembered that she'd taken her jacket off in Steve's room, and it was probably still there. So she walked up the stairs again, intent on taking her jacket and leaving.

But then she heard hushed voices from the doorway to Steve's room, and couldn't help listening in.

"-missed you."

"Mmm, but your ... parents?"

"I doubt they even noticed me leaving. I showed up, I kissed ass for a

couple of hours, and then I left. Why should I stay at a hotel overnight when I could just as easily drive home to be here with you?"

"Not exactly ... the bes' company righ' now."

"Oh shut up. Aren't you always the one to tell me you're such a *delight at all times*? And that I should be *happy* that I get to spend time with you *at all*?"

A huff of breath, then, "Love you."

A pause, before, softly; "I love you too."

Joyce decided, suddenly, that she didn't need her jacket right now. Silently, she turned and snuck down the stairs. Put on her shoes, went outside and carefully shut the door behind her.

She smiled to herself during the whole drive home.

The next morning, she decided to go by the Harrington house to pick up her jacket and see how the boys were doing, so she left home ten minutes earlier than usual. She considered ringing the doorbell, but it was early and she didn't want to wake them up if they were asleep – they could both use their rest, after all; Billy because he was sick, and Steve because he'd made a long drive last night. When she discovered that the door was still unlocked, she wasn't terribly surprised, and was thus prepared for the sight that greeted her when she opened the door to Steve's room after climbing the stairs.

Billy had scooted back on the bed to make room for Steve, who was lying on his back next to him. Steve was still wearing the same clothes he had been wearing last night, as if had simply crawled into bed as soon as Joyce had left. Billy was curled up against him, with his head in the crook of Steve's neck, and their fingers were intertwined and resting on Steve's stomach. Early morning light was coming in from the window, touching Billy's shoulder and Steve's face, making the whole scene even more serene.

They looked ... peaceful.

Joyce let out a breath and took a couple of steps into the room to grab her jacket, which she had discarded over the back of a chair last night. As she grabbed it, she noticed movement from the bed, and when she looked over, she met with wide blue eyes who were watching her every move.

When Billy saw her looking, his eyes darted to where he and Steve were holding hands, and he drew in a sharp breath and made to – no doubt – yank his hand away. But before he could, Joyce held up her hands.

"No, no, you'll wake him", she whispered. That seemed to be enough to halt Billy, who still looked tense and wide-eyed, as if he was expecting the worst. Her face softened.

"It's okay. I just came by to grab my jacket." She held it up to show him. "Forgot it last night."

She saw him frown – and although he looked a lot better than last night, he was still flushed and his eyes still had a glassy sheen to them, so she wasn't sure he remembered her.

"I was here yesterday", she clarified. "Steve asked me to check up on you."

At the mention of Steve's name, Billy relaxed a fraction. He briefly looked down at Steve's sleeping face, and their interlocked hands, before he looked back up. She made sure to give him a warm smile and a nod.

"It's good to see that you're feeling better. Make sure to drink lots of water, and try to eat something, even if it's just soup. Tell Steve I stopped by, when he wakes up, and to call me if you need anything."

Billy, still looking confused – but, she was happy to note, less terrified – nodded. Wet his lips. His voice, when he spoke, was hoarse.

"Uh, thank you, ma'am."

She gave a low laugh. "I held you and fed you soup yesterday, Billy, I think we're passed the 'ma'am'-stage. I'm Joyce."

And maybe it was the fever, but his face looked a little more flushed all of a sudden. He looked down. Bit his lip.

"Thank you. Joyce."

She could sense his uneasiness from across the room, so she smiled again as she put on her jacket.

"Don't mention it. Take care of yourself now ... and Steve, too."

He looked up in surprise. She indicated their hands, and said, "I won't tell anyone, don't worry."

And he looked at her as if – maybe, just maybe – he could believe her.

It wasn't three days later when Steve shuffled into the store during Joyce's shift, looking worse for wear. His nose was red and his lips were dry, but he managed to muster up a smile for her when he stood at the other side of the counter with the items. She raised an eyebrow.

"Already out of Tylenol, Steve? I remember you had a full bottle just days ago."

"I ... uh, I sent it home with Billy, in case he needed it? I thought I had more, but ..."

He shrugged, and Joyce smiled at him.

"You're a good friend, Steve. Do you still have some of the soup I left?"

"No, I ... sent that with Billy, too."

"All right, then. I'm coming over, after work, and making you more. No buts, mister! Go home, drink lots of water and make sure you're well taken care of." She grinned at him, knowingly. "You could call your friend to come over and keep you company. I doubt he'll catch the same cold twice."

7. No Running At The Pool!

THWIIIIIT

"*What* did I just say? *No* running at the pool!"

Max sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Give it a rest, Billy, you're not at work now. It's Sunday, and this is Steve's pool!"

Billy straightened up and chewed on the end of his whistle, which had appeared in his mouth as soon as Will and Lucas had started moving at a pace slightly faster than a jog.

"And Steve isn't here right now", he said and glared at the offenders, who had the good sense to avert their eyes. "He put me in charge, and as long as I'm in charge –"

" – there'll be no running at the pool", the Party finished along with him. They knew. After four weeks of hanging out at the public pool (it was a warm summer, and Steve wouldn't let them use his pool unsupervised – ie when he was at work) and having to endure Billy chewing out half of Hawkins' population under the age of 14, they knew.

(They also knew the shrill sound of the whistle – intimately. So did everyone who visited the public pool. It had gotten to the point where all of them actually froze in whatever they were doing as soon as they heard it; bracing for Billy to tell someone what they'd done wrong this time. This pavlovian response to the whistle was something that Billy had figured out fast, and used to his advantage. Nowadays, he carried the damn thing with him all the time, and never hesitated to use it. Just the other day, he'd made a woman drop a carton of juice outside the grocery store when he blew it at Max for skating in the parking lot – the woman forgave him as soon as he turned on the charm though – apparently she was a regular visitor at the pool, and knew Billy by name.)

Now, he nodded sternly at their. "That's right."

But Mike – because of course it was Mike – wasn't ready to let it go just yet.

"What does it even matter if we're running at the pool. It's not like it's concrete – it's *water*. If we call in, it won't matter because all of us can swim!"

The others shook their heads in warning and motioned for him to shut up, and a wide-eyed Max frantically did a throat-cutting gesture, but it was too late. Billy's eyes lit up at the opportunity to rant on proper pool protocol, and he took a couple of steps forwards so he was standing right in front of Mike. He tilted his head back somewhat, so he could look down his nose at the kid (because damn, Mike had really hit a growth spurt lately, and was almost as tall as Billy was by now). The whistle was still between his lips – a threat, if there ever was one.

"Uh-huh, well aren't you the little genius?" Billy sneered and pointed at the ground. "The *sides* of the pool are concrete, though, aren't they? So what if you hit your head on the way down, and end up unconscious in the water? You can't swim if you're unconscious."

Billy leaned in closer, and Mike visibly struggled not to back away. He frowned, and licked his lips. Nodded towards the rest of the Party, who were standing off to the side, watching. "Well, if that happens, someone will pull me up."

THWIIIIIT

He flinched hard when Billy blew the whistle two feet from his face.

"Yeah, asshole, *someone*." Billy drew himself up and pointed at himself with a thumb. "Someone, as in a *lifeguard*. As in a person who is *trained to save lives*. As in someone whose advice you better take, to avoid ending up in situations where your life is in danger."

At this, Dustin piped up from the sidelines. "Come on. It's not like we haven't been through worse alr–"

THWIIIIIT

Billy blew his whistle just as the rest of the party glared at Dustin,

who abruptly shut up, looking chagrined. If Billy noticed the glares from the rest of the Party, he didn't give any indication of it – too focused on trying to glare Dustin into submission.

"I don't care what you've been through before. I care what you're going through *now*, on my watch. And you're *not* drowning on my watch."

A pause, in which no one said anything at first. Then Max's eyes narrowed, and a slow grin appeared on her face. It made everyone present squirm in discomfort – that kind of grin was never a prelude to anything pleasant.

"So", she said, faux-casually, and thus sending a chill down everyone's spines, "what you're saying is that you *care* about us?"

Billy, perhaps realizing that he'd made a wrong turn somewhere, stiffened.

"No", he said gruffly.

"But you said that you *care* what we're going through now –"

"I said that you're not drowning on my watch. I'm a lifeguard. It's my job. If you're gonna drown, do it in your own time."

Another smile, sweet like poisoned honey. "But this *is* our own time. And you're off duty."

Gritting his teeth, Billy glared at her with the kind of malice that was usually a precursor to some kind of violent outburst. The rest of the Party took an unconscious step back.

"A lifeguard is never off duty."

Mad raised her eyebrows, about to make a point.

"So you're saying that it ... oh, I don't know ... *Keith* was running at the pool when you weren't even working, you wouldn't push him in just to be an ass, or trip him to watch him fall on his face?"

After a second – in which Billy seemed to be imagining the scenario,

judging by the way he huffed out an amused breath – Billy grinned smugly. "That's a trick question – Keith wouldn't run if his life depended on it."

Max crossed her arms over her chest.

"Just admit that you care."

"Never."

"Then what's the harm in us running."

"I told you already, you could get hurt."

Even before he'd finished speaking, Billy looked like he wanted to take the words back. Max grinned, and didn't hesitate before pouncing.

"But you just said you didn't care! What's it gonna be, Billy?"

Frustrated, Billy held the whistle in his hand in warning, before growling, "Listen here you little shit, I don't care about any of you but Steve put me in charge of your well-being, and I –"

"– and you care about Steve", she finished for him, smiling like a shark.

Momentarily dumb-struck, Billy just stared at her for several long seconds. The Party held their collective breath. Max wouldn't stop grinning.

Then, Billy dropped his whistle. But only so that he'd be able to pick Max up from the ground. She barely had time to voice a protest before he threw her, kicking and screaming, into the water. There was a big splash, and a second later she emerged, cursing up a storm.

And Billy laughed. Like, a real *I'm-honestly-amused-laugh*.

It was the Party's turn to be struck dumb with shock. Only for a few seconds, though – a party member was down and the act demanded retribution. With a war cry, Dustin, Lucas, Mike and Will charged at Billy, who was too busy laughing to notice.

When Steve got back from the store with an armful of snacks and sodas, he found that the backyard had turned into a battle ground. Three of the deck chairs were overturned, one was floating in the water alongside a towel, and all members of the Party except for Lucas were currently in the middle of the pool, huddling together. Lucas was on one end of the pool, holding Billy's whistle in one hand, while Billy was stalking the other side without taking his eyes off his prey – when Billy ran one way, Lucas ran the other to avoid getting caught.

Both of them saw Steve at the same time.

"Steve!" Lucas yelled and ran at him. "Help me!"

"Steve!" Billy growled and followed. "Hold him!"

"Hey!" Dustin piped up from the water. "No running at the pool, remember?"

Everyone ignored him.

Steve dropped what he was holding and held his hands out in front of him to stop Billy from getting at Lucas, who had ran behind Steve and was hiding out of reach. "Whoa, guys, what's going on?"

"He's crazy and wants to drown us!" Lucas said.

"He's gone mad with power!" Mike said.

"He threw us all in the pool!" Max said.

"These little shits wouldn't follow pool safety protocol!" Billy rumbled, and tried getting around Steve.

Steve used the reflexes honed by years of basketball to stop him, and ended up holding Billy's shoulders, looking at him with raised eyebrows.

"So you threw them in the pool?"

"Yeah!" Billy said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"They were running at the pool. They could have fallen in. Hurt themselves."

"Let me get this straight", Steve said, rubbing his eyebrow. "They were running at the pool, and could have fallen in. So you ... threw them in the water for it?"

Billy gave him a look as if he was a bit slow, and nodded. "Yeah. Your point?"

Steve looked between Billy and the kids, who were now climbing out of the water, looking like drowned rats. He took a deep breath. Blinked a couple of times.

"You know what? Nothing. It makes perfect sense." He turned to the kids. "You guys want snacks or what?"

He was answered with a somewhat subdued chorus of *Yeahs*, and roped Billy into helping him pick up the items he'd dropped and carry them into the kitchen.

"I want my whistle back!" Billy called after Lucas, who scurried past them to catch up with Max.

"In your dreams!" Max snarled as she tried to straighten out her hair.

Billy just grinned at her, looking pleased as pie.

Dustin stopped in the doorway and turned to Steve, pointing at Billy and frowning. "Leaving him in charge was the worst idea you've ever had, Steve!"

He glowered at Billy before he disappeared into the house. Steve turned to Billy, whose sharp grin melted into a real smile. At Steve's questioning look, Billy shrugged.

"Leaving me in charge was the right thing to do, babe. I'm a *lifeguard*, after all." But then his smile slipped off his face, and he levelled Steve with a serious look. "But yeah, please don't leave me alone with them again. They're gremlins, all of them."